

September 5, 18—



Dear Philip,

I have the most extraordinary news—Robin is home! He arrived quite unexpectedly, no advance word whatsoever, and I must say I did not at first recognise my own brother, he has changed so in these (can it be?) these *three years*. Agatha and I were with Mrs O’Hair in the kitchen boiling currants to put up (Mrs O is quite knowledgeable in the methods of preservation—the brutal Londonderry winters of her youth, she says—I know you will take to her and not find her *Irishness* unforgiveable), and I was slightly flustered because a bowl had slipped from Aggie’s fingers and broken on the floor. I had just picked up the pieces and therefore did not hear Robin’s conveyance stop before the house. Then Felix was in the kitchen reporting that a man was in the foyer. Heavens, I thought, Felix has let a beggar into the house—for who would be calling so early in the morning (the butcher’s boy had already

been round to take our order); and Felix's sweet nature, well, you have said it, too much sugar can be a deficiency. I was thinking perhaps I should send Felix to fetch Mr Smythe across the alley, to send away the fellow—but I recalled Mr Smythe's gout has been a particular bother of late, so I thought, no, I must see to this new arrival. You have said that I must exercise my will to run a proper home as lady of the house, my dear, and I recalled it just then; so I dried my hands and removed my apron, as not to offer the appearance of a servant but rather said lady of the house, and went to see to this stranger inside our door.

The moment I stepped from the kitchen, fragrant with boiling currants, I was assailed by the streetbeggar's odor, accented, I realised, with the tart smell of the sea and its wretched wharfs—and perhaps it was then that the idea of Robin's return began to come, shyly, almost like a secret I was keeping from myself. In the foyer, the first item I saw was his sailor's duffel propped against the wall. It was a collage of unwholesome stains, and I half expected a gruesome yellow-incisored rat to scurry from its ramshackle contents.

But my word, Philip—the fellow himself! *Frightful* only barely begins to touch upon his appearance. His topcoat was scarred with stitches and patches, its hem come loose and frayed. His trousers were also stitched and worn shiny and thin at the knee, his shoes a wreck, one with the buckle absent altogether and made fast by leather strings wove in an uneven web. I swear all this came to me in the flash of a moment, as if I had

studied the poor wretch's portrait of an afternoon at the National.

But his face! Framed in a wild mane of hair, bleached seasalt grey, the same as his beard, both untouched by barber for months, if not years—it gave him the look of a lion, but not a powerful predator, rather an aged lion-emperor, his pride usurped, left to await the end, alone, and beaten.

Beneath the wild, untrimmed beard his cheeks were gaunt, which made me realise his overall thinness, like a refugee of famine. Even his fingers were elongated, the knuckles standing out like stones beneath the mummified skin, tarred black with dirt and dire circumstances. I thought at first the small and ring fingers of his left hand were oddly turned under, out of view, but no . . . they were missing—only their uneven stubs remained.

When I stepped toward him he turned his eyes upon me, and then I knew him, I knew my brother had returned after three years at sea. I knew him though I had never seen eyes like these: blue, yes, but the blue of ice, of seafoam, like his time in the Arctic waste had frostbitten his eyes, left them permanently cold and—I fear to write it, as if writing it may make it a sentence and a harbinger—cold and lifeless. They were as sterile as two silver coins, but coins which have been retrieved from the bottom of a well where their luster has been dulled over time.

'Poor Robin,' I said—that was all I could say. I think I was in a state of shock. I had been wishing for my

brother's safe return so ardently for so long . . . and here he was, alive—yes, but appearing to be a revenant, a phantom form of the man who sailed from Hastings that sunny day, captain of his own ship, which he christened the *Benjamin Franklin*, gallantly gleaming in the forecastle with fortitude and fearlessness.

Not a word for two whole years—the last letter had arrived from Arkhangelsk, more than six months in its own ragged travels. Excited still for the expedition, except a strain of loneliness had already crept into his pen and coloured the ink.

I am sorry, my darling, I am running on now about things you already know. It is just that I am lonely myself—I cannot speak with Mrs O'Hair, not as an equal of course, nor to the children. I do wish that you would conclude your affairs and return to us. That would set my spirits aright.

Sept 6—First, allow me to apologise for my self-indulgent lines above. I know you are toiling on our behalves, and I need not increase your burden by tossing on the weight of my loneliness. Who am I to claim loneliness in such a bustling house, under a roof and amid furnishings that your hard work has secured for us? My mind and my heart never forget it, my darling, but sometimes my hand runs ahead of my thoughts.

Please do not be upset, but I placed Robin in little Maurice's room—I knew not where else, and he does not have means for other lodging at the moment. Not to mention he needs looking after, the care of family, until he is quite himself again. I know that Rob-

in's presence will be good for the children. They have missed a man in the house since you have been away. I do not mean to suggest that Robin can take your place, not for a moment do I mean it—but I must admit that even I anticipate feeling easier with him here. There have been many nights when I have felt your absence keenly and lay awake listening to every shift and shudder of this ancient house. And when the weather is warm, and the windows have to be raised, I am watchful indeed, starting at every noise from the street, every footfall, every voice, every shut door, every wincing hinge. Sometimes I rise from the empty-feeling bed and check on the children, at least that is what I tell myself, but in truth I think I am just seeking human companionship. At those dark hours I sense the weight of your long absence most acutely, and I just need to stand inside the children's doors and listen to their breathing. I do not bother with a candle for my vigil, not wanting to disturb them—and besides you have always said my powers to see in total gloom are positively feline. Though I fear all the stitchwork has dulled my eyes somewhat—but it fetches a few farthings, and I do enjoy it. I really do believe that had I the good fortune to have been born male I should have liked to have been a painter or some other sort of creative artist. Thank you for indulging my fantasies. I know you believe them unhealthy, and that it is better to stay grounded in the material world, where my nerves are steadier.

You are right to say, of course, and I do believe

my brother's return will help to cheer me. Between the clever husbandry of Mrs O'Hair and Robin's influence, I know I will be quite right again. Trust that I work against the sadness and bitterness I have felt since losing our little dove. Some days I feel I am conquering the emotions. And I do find writing to you a comfort. I hope my meandering missives are not too taxing upon you, for I would not wish to add to your cares—I know that the affairs which keep you away must be very tiring and troublesome indeed.

I have been away from the page, and now describe a later incident. There was a most terrible shouting—one would think a murder was being enacted—and at first I believed it was from the street. I was working at my stitching in the kitchen (in the morning the light is so much brighter there than in the parlour), and Mrs O and I looked upon each other quite startled, and I wondered at Felix, whether he was out of doors—but then the shouting continued and I realised it was coming from *inside* the house. I went to the hall, where both Felix and Agatha were standing holding hands, for the children too were a little shocked, and I realised the voice must be coming from Maurice's room, that it was Robin who was crying out. Mrs O had followed me to the hall, and I asked her to take the children to the kitchen for some milk while I saw to my brother. I went upstairs and tapped on Maurice's door; I did not anticipate a lucid reply as I could hear Robin speaking, though in no coherent manner. I gently opened the door. The curtains were shut tight,

which rendered the room most gloomy, yet I saw well enough to notice that Robin had ejected the blankets from himself and they lay upon the floor, twisted and tangled. Robin was on the bed in a spasmodic reclination, and even with the dim lighting I could see that he had perspired through his nightshirt and beads were still heavy upon his brow. I quickly turned away when I comprehended Robin's state of undress. I thought for a moment that my entering the room had stirred him and he was speaking to me, except his words carried no meaning. I used my hand to shield his nakedness from my sight and I looked at his face, his eyes darting to and fro beneath their lids, and his lips muttering the inarticulate sounds. I listened closely to try to snatch a word or two, but I was not even certain then that he spoke English in his day-terror. Robin was always a quick student of languages, and who knows in his long travels what strange tongues he has acquired. That thought made me recall Acts: What if Robin is a messenger of some sort? And I recalled my doubting of Him—I had prayed so fervently at little Maurice's bedside, begging God to heal Maurice's lungs. You tried to pull me away, my darling, urging me to rest myself, reminding me that Agatha and Felix needed their mother. But I knew if I was devoted enough, if I pulled the pleas to spare our little dove from my very soul, spaded them up from my blackest, richest soil, soaked in my very heart's blood—God would hear them and would be moved to act.

But no. Instead I had to hold Maurice's hand while

he slowly drowned in his own bed. I often dream of the small hand that went from feverishly hot to cadaverously cold in my desperate grip.

What if this is the prayer that God answered? He has returned my brother to me, as if resurrected from the dead, for that is how I had begun to think of him, dead and gone, his body sarcophagused in ice. Now he is returned and perhaps bearing a message. It would be a comfort to believe in Him again, to feel His presence and not an utter void in the dark night—

Listen to me! Or rather do not! You will think I have gone daft. Spinning on about such stuff better left to philosophers of divinity.

Robin seemed to settle himself and was calmer in his sleep, so I crept from the room and went to reassure the children, who, I discovered, were quite content under Mrs O's gentle hand. She had given them some sweetbread soaked in milk—just a small wedge; she is mindful not to spoil their appetites. Mrs O developed an attachment to the children promptly when she came. There is something in her eyes when she looks upon them, Felix especially, that seems to be recognition, as if they remind her of other children, her own perhaps—but the memories would have to be very old ones as she is well beyond her childbearing years, well into her fifties I should think, maybe even sixty. The word that comes to mind when I think of Mrs O is *grey*—grey hair, yes, and eyes, and her two everyday frocks are shades of grey too. Yet it is more than all that: There is a grey cast that forms a sort of

backdrop in spite of her generally cheerful and industrious demeanor. It is like she has emerged from some gloom and she is determined not to let it get the better of her; still it lurks there, just at her heel.

I am sorry to run on so, my darling. You will accuse me of projecting drama onto my colourless little life. I think I hear Robin stirring—he at least was restful after his episode of ‘night’ terrors. I must have Mrs O prepare him some nourishment. Until later, my love—

I trust you will not be cross that I have lent some of your older clothes to Robin. The clothes he arrived in were quite beyond salvaging, and the few items of apparel in his duffel were little more than tattered rags. There is a trunk coming from Hastings, perhaps, which may contain some clothing. I must say ‘perhaps’ and ‘may’ due to its being quite difficult to extract any certain intelligence—and I did come to feel like my brother’s enquisitor; as soon as I realised it, I refrained from further questioning as I did not want Robin to feel the target of intrusive investigation.

Let me take a few steps backward, my dear. It was nearly the hour of noon when I heard Robin upon the stair and I went to him straight away. Mrs O and I had been listening for him, or for another episode, all morning, and she was prepared to execute his breakfast as soon as he had roused. Robin sat upon the fourth stair as if he could go no farther without risk of faltering altogether. He had managed himself into his threadbare pants in addition to his nightshirt, but his feet were bare, and I had to resist the repulsion I felt

at the sight of them: ashen grey, with dirt I suppose, and missing toes, his three smallest toes, one from his left foot, two from his right. 'You must be famished,' I managed. 'Let me help you to your room, and Mrs O'Hair will bring you some tea and food momentarily.' Mrs O carried him up a pot of tea and toasted bread with her currant jam. I can tell she is a trifle wary of him, though she has not said as much. If she knew him as I do, if she had known him in childhood and his exuberant youth—then she could have no trepidation whatsoever. For Robin was the most assiduous, studious and kindhearted boy, though solitary I must acknowledge, especially in his youth, spending hour upon hour in Uncle's library, reading and forming (apparently) his design to explore the Arctic region. To place his name alongside Magellan, Columbus, de Soto. He would have liked to go to school, would have liked to in the worst way, but of course that was not possible—I know, my darling, I need not remind you; you married a dowerless girl.

To return to events: After a time, Mrs O retrieved the teapot and such from Robin's room—he had drunk every drop of tea but barely tasted the toast and jam. It was then that Mrs O suggested that 'Master Robert may like a bath, mum', and she was quite right to suggest it. She began heating water while I went upstairs to broach the topic with Robin, who was at first reluctant but on account, I came to discover, of his having no decent clothes afterward in which to dress. So I resolved that the only answer was for Robin to borrow

some of your things, my dear—again, I hope you shall not object. I selected the items which I believe you consider your least favored, which is why you left them when you went on your business affair. Robin emerged from his room having to keep hold of the pants, they were so large upon his shrunken frame, and the shirt hung like a sail on the mast of a becalmed ship. I had no true idea of his thinness until I saw him in your clothes, you who has always been so lean, due to your great love of walking. Robin has become as lean and as wiry as one of those dogs who live in the streets, hunting for scraps—and also as chary, I should say, for my brother gives the impression of always being on alert, of constantly glancing over his shoulder, or rather, of constantly *wanting to*. The ill-fitting clothes were sufficient for him to reach the washroom, where Mrs O had drawn him a hot bath. While he soaked, Mrs O made the clothing more serviceable, fashioning loops and a drawstring to cinch the waist of the pants, and gathering the shirt into pleats in back with some well-placed stitches—all quite clever really, and done with unexpected speed, though her eyesight has faltered over the years, she tells me, and she had to squint at the close work of sewing.

Meanwhile, I recalled that Mr Smythe had some knowledge of barbering, in his younger days, thus I went across the alley and spoke with him; luckily his gout was not so insufferable, and it afforded him an opportunity to exercise a skill that had long lay dormant. He required a moment to ready himself but presently

he was at our door, shears and comb in hand. The irony struck me then: here he had come to tidy my brother's appearance, while Mr S has allowed his own to lapse in his widowhood and infirmity. His hoary hair has grown wild, and his white muttonchops quite cover his ears, while his brows are like the unfolded snowy wings of owlets above his eyes. To facilitate the barbering, we set a kitchen chair outside the alley door, and Mr S went to work. Felix and Agatha sat on the stoop fascinated by the transformation of their uncle as Mr Smythe deposited long gobbets of hair into the gutter. I checked his progress now and again, and I found the metamorphosis startling too . . . or perhaps increasingly unsettling would be a more apt characterization. For on the one hand, Mr Smythe's barbering definitely rendered Robin more presentable—he had looked the part of the ruffian and wharf-dweller—but that mask had been obscuring Robin's gaunt and haunted physiognomy. His hair and beard were trimmed and shaped for parlour society, yet he appeared a man whose parlour stories would be grim tales of tragedies barely survived. I believe even Mr S was taken aback at the face that emerged from the marble, as he chipped away with his sculpting shears. When he was nearly finished I told the children it was time to return to their studies, and they were decidedly pale. I was hoping, I suppose, that grooming my brother would assure them that we are hosting a quite civilised creature under our roof—for they barely knew their uncle prior to his expedition—however,

I cannot imagine what they think of him now. They always heard stories of their Uncle Robin, his Herculean feats of autodidacticism, sequestered in *our* uncle's library at Lytham House, teaching himself calculus, astronomy, geography, anatomy, and heaven only knows. I would often imagine him there, alone in the book-lined room, the meekest of fires to fend off the chill, solitary in the rambling house except for Uncle's ancient man, William, who tended to Robin's needs until he eventually signed onto the whaler, the *Molly O'Toole*, as a common sailor to learn seamanship firsthand, figuring that for some kinds of knowledge only the thing itself will do. That is to say, he could not learn to captain his own expeditionary ship by books alone.

I am so sorry, my darling—I know you are well-acquainted with your brother-in-law's biography, but it does me good to recount things, to reaffirm them in my memory. I feel at times that the past is slipping from me, that I am perhaps thinking of someone else's history—or not even a real person's, rather a character's I have read in some author's book, and it has taken hold of me so that I cannot separate it from my own life's narrative (you know how easily I can become lost in a book, quite to my shame, I must acknowledge—I know you think it a personal flaw, and I have been trying to exorcise it during your absence, one of several qualities of the newly improved me of which I believe you will approve upon your return, but I shall merely tease you with that flirtatious hint, to entice you to

conclude your affairs as expeditiously as possible).

In spite of being a trifle shocked by Robin's wasted appearance, Mr Smythe, no doubt due to his own loneliness and generally kind nature, invited him to smoke a bowl of tobacco with him after he had had a chance to sup—'a fine Rajasthan cut', Mr S described it. I knew that Robin would decline, if for no other reason than he had never been attracted to tobacco—but he surprised me by accepting our neighbour's invitation. I realised that my brother has no doubt taken up many new occupations during his years at sea, occupations to fill the countless empty hours among the desolate waves and phantasmagoric bergs of ice.

My occupation seems to be letter-writing, if not this letter itself. I find I do not want to put aside the pen and tend to responsibilities. And when I do, when necessity insists, I find that I am thinking of writing, itching to return to it. I have heard stories of the opium fiends, the men (and women) who are possessed by a desire for the drug, no matter its deleterious qualities. I can now relate to that possession. Writing seems to have unlocked something in me. I can only pray that it will not prove as destructive as a burning thirst for the fruits of the poppy.

(I know I have not posted, but I find myself only partway down a page, thus, my dear, to avoid the waste . . .)

The aroma of Mr Smythe's Oriental tobacco wafted indoors as the kitchen windows were raised to let some air circulate. Mrs O and I were preparing vege-

tables to add to the simmering stock, whose richness competed with the bowls of tobacco. With the windows raised a quarter, between chops and scrapes of Mrs O's and my blades, I overheard the pipe-smokers' conversation. Mr S dominated the discussion (which I expected, given my brother's taciturnity since his return). Mr S had served King and country in the colonies, and he was relating a tale that he experienced 'in the wilds of Nova Scotia.' The Indians there—Mr S pronounced the tribe's name but I shall not attempt to spell it—had a legend of some beast that lived in the forest, some creature that walked upon two legs, like a man, and was even reported to speak the names of his victims before dispatching them most horrifically. Mr S acknowledged that he was yet a young man and still possessed of an overly romantic fancy, so he was prone to believe such tales more than he ought. He was assigned to escort a survey detail to Fort Sackville, which required a three days' hike through the woods. On the first day, light began to fade by midafternoon, so impenetrable were the woods and so far north. This particular band of Indians kept dogs, and when they made camp the dogs would place themselves about its perimeter. The ragtag assembly of His Majesty's foot-soldiers, surveyors, native guides, and a pair of French trappers who served as linguists settled in for the long arboreal night, building their cook fire, preparing food and tea, and unpacking their bedrolls. The moment darkness descended in total, the dogs—great furry creatures, said Mr S, some northern relation of

the English mastiff—they became on edge and watchful. Their wide, shaggy backsides shone in the golden firelight as they sat upon their haunches and stared ever so keenly into the blackness that surrounded them. The soldiers and the trappers attempted to disregard the dogs, who would emit every now and then a low growl, but their Indian masters were most attune to the dogs' behavior. The Indians were as quiet as Puritans at prayer, sipping their tea and keeping their fingers only inches from their long-bladed knives and war-hatchets. Mr S fell asleep, utterly exhausted from the hike and the Frenchmen's homemade spirits that they had packed—only to awake later to some sort of disturbance. It was still the blackest hours of night, and the Indians were fully alert, standing with backs to one another, their weapons drawn. Their big dogs were on their feet menacing the darkness with their rumbling growls. Mr Smythe and the other soldiers took up their muskets, not bothering to charge and load them by diminished firelight but brandishing their bayonets.

I must say, I was slow in my vegetable preparation as I was enthralled by our neighbour's tale. I am afraid that was the climax of it, however. The camp eventually settled—though no one returned to sleep, Mr S assured my brother. There were some language barriers, but Mr S came to understand from the Indians, filtered through the Frenchmen into broken English, that they believed they had had an encounter with 'the Hairy Man of the Forest'—the being who had plagued

their people for generations. They further believed it was only the presence of their powerful dogs that dissuaded the Hairy Man from entering their camp.

Mr S had been long of wind, and his story had taken some time to tell—but he had clearly reached its conclusion, and by conventional rules it was Robin's turn to respond in some verbal way. Yet a silence ensued. Even Mrs O was quiet at her chopping as she too must have been spellbound by our neighbour's narrative. From my vantage I could not quite see the interlocutors. However, if I looked through the window, toward the left, I could see their pipes' upward columns of smoke; and when a few seconds of long-enduring silence stretched itself out, I spied that Robin's column was behaving most queerly, rising in a zigzag pattern as if a writhing serpent of steam. I leaned so that I had a fuller view and I saw that Robin's hand which held the pipe was trembling rather violently. I hastened to exit the kitchen and as I did I heard Mr S questioning my brother as to his disposition. I was momentarily at Robin's side. How to describe him? As I have said, his hand trembled, yes, as did his entire body; or perhaps more accurately, his entire being—for one received the impression that even his soul vibrated with whatever had taken hold of him. He stared into the space before him but not seeing the doors and windows of the close-quartered houses, as tightly together as barrel staves, yet seeing something else, something terrible, for his brow was knit in a contortion of horror. I swear, his hair and beard, though now neatly trimmed, had

turned a hoarier white, as if he had aged while sitting in the alley, smoking and listening to our neighbour's strange story. It may be that a pallor had come to his countenance, beneath the beard, and it had magnified the strands of white. It occurred to me that someone looking upon the scene may believe at a glance that Mr Smythe and Robin are contemporaries—yet my brother is but thirty years old. I considered for a moment that my arithmetic must be in error, he seemed so aged before my eyes there in the alley. The figure is quite correct, however.

Mr S removed the pipe from Robin's trembling grip (his fingers were solidly locked around the bowl), and I coaxed him to stand. It required a moment's urging but he did finally rise and allow me to assist him indoors. I thanked Mr S for his kindnesses, over my shoulder, and wished him a good evening. I believe he felt responsible as the instrument of Robin's petrification, but I did not believe him at fault. There is no question that Robin returned to us with a fragile constitution—Mr S could not have known that an interesting traveler's tale would have such an affect on Robin, himself now a man of the wide world. No doubt our neighbour was hoping to prompt Robin into sharing some intriguing narrative of his own journeys, tit for tat—something to bring some colour to Mr S's typically monochromatic day.

Robin's reaction recalled for me the behaviours of some of the men who fought against the colonies in their rebellion. I was still a girl when they began to

come home in their inglorious defeat. In particular I recall the son of our neighbours, the Wadkinses. On occasion he would accompany them when they came for tea. Nathan was his name. I was permitted to sit in the parlour as long as I did not speak. I remember observing Mr Nathan, who also was largely taciturn on these visitings, and it occurred to me there was something rather *shattered* about him. Not his physique, I mean—although he did appear to favor one leg—rather, his spirit or his *persona* was in pieces, like a china platter that has been dropped, and it lay upon the floor essentially in the pattern of its former self, but the pieces are no longer connected and some are angled oddly from the whole of the new composition, and here and there some small fragments may seem to be missing altogether. (There have been nights, when I silently looked upon the children in their beds, that I felt like such a platter, now that I conjure the comparison.)

So that is how I thought of Robin as I assisted him indoors: He resembled his former self, but there was something broken about him. I do not want to alarm you, my dear; Robin is not violent, I am certain of it. Beneath whatever has affected him so profoundly, he is still the gentle, kindhearted brother whom I remember so fondly. And, to be sure, once he was seated in our cozy parlour, with a shawl upon his shoulders, though it was to ward off a chill that only he seemed to feel, and with a cup of Mrs O's excellent tea—Robin became at peace again.

Here I have been filling sheet upon sheet with my rambling thoughts and observations, and have said very little of our dear ones, about whom, I know, you thirst for intelligences most of all! I have mentioned how I believe you will take to the industrious Mrs O'Hair—well, certainly Agatha has. I often find her spying Mrs O from the hall or through the window, when she and her brother are to be playing out-of-doors to receive some air. Aggie seems most fascinated with the exotic Mrs O. Neither of the children has been much exposed to the Irish, particularly an *Irishwoman*. Of course Mrs O was not blind to Aggie's fascination, and she began inviting her to assist her in her duties, especially in the kitchen, for Agatha's edification—not to train our little girl to be a domestic! Of course not. But there are certain fundamental skills that are useful to possess no matter one's station in life. I am certain, my dear, that you agree on that point. For how can one evaluate a cook's or a maid's skillfulness if one has no base of knowledge from which to judge? I have always felt somewhat off my footing in such matters, relying principally on luck when employing necessary positions. Which is why I have availed myself of Mrs O's clear expertises; and I, also, am being tutored, though not as directly as our Agatha. As I sit and stitch in the kitchen, I keep a keen eye on Mrs O's procedures, committing them to memory until such time that I may record them in my miscellany. Except of course for those times I have been pointedly involved, as in the making of the currant jam.

At first Mrs O was loath to afford Aggie much responsibility, undoubtedly feeling that she was too much of a child—she presents that image on account of her being small for her age. But Mrs O has come to accept that our Agatha is twelve, or nearly so, and hence is become a young lady. I daresay she will be out and married and raising a family of her own before we know what has happened. Though I must say it is difficult to imagine at times; when, for instance, she and Felix play knucklebones or nine-men's-Morris in the alley; or when she carries with her on stormy nights Miss Buzzle, her ragdoll; or when she and Felix squabble over the most childish disputes, like who will receive the last bit of ice shavings to sweeten with molasses (you will recall what a treat the children count it, especially our little Maurice, who seemed to have a molasses tooth).

Do not mistake me: The children are good. You can be proud of them in your absence. As I said, Agatha is become a young lady. When she assists Mrs O in the kitchen, she pins up her hair into a chestnut bun, and she dons an apron that Mrs O has fashioned just her size; add the air of seriousness, and our Aggie could pass for mistress of her own house. I was struck with that image, again, just the other day, the day before Robin's arrival, I believe. I said something in greeting when I entered the kitchen, and Aggie turned to me and there was a thumbprint of flour on her cheekbone; and something about it along with her hair swept from her face (classically heart-shaped, as

you always said), and maybe, too, the grey shade of her frock's collar—well, I was struck by the blue of her eyes. I remembered thinking of them as 'glacial' blue, which was odd for I have never been in the far northern part of the world, and I surmised it was an adjective I must have extracted from one of Robin's letters, though I could not recall the phrase's origin precisely. I thought that I must take up my brother's correspondences from the bureau drawer in the parlour, and re-read them to satisfy my curiosity about the word in my vocabulary—for it may have gained entrance from some other source, from some book, for example.

However, then I neglected to take up the letters, and the very next day Robin turned up in our foyer, as reborn as Lazarus. And Robin's eyes, too, exhibited the exact icy-blue quality of Agatha's—I take note of the similarity only now, in retrospect.

(I must cease for the time being, dearest, and I could justify posting, for I have very nearly reached the terminus of this sheet—but I feel I must give Felix, out of maternal fairness, equal 'stage time,' as it were.)

Sept 7—I believe the greatest change you will discover in Felix when you return is his bibliophilism. He always enjoyed being read to but in the past few months his own passion for reading has become inflamed. Even when he is at play with his sister, in the alley or hall or parlour, he likes to have a book near at hand, almost as if comforted by it, the way Miss Buzzle comforts Agatha. I know you at times felt entombed by Uncle's books when they arrived in two full

carts and we had no choice but to stack them along the walls in every room, save the kitchen and wash-room, for the modest bookcase in the parlour could hold but a thimbleful compared to the tun that would be required. I further know your sometimes irksome disposition toward the stacks of books that haunt about the house was due to your disappointment in the settling of Uncle's estate, but it is fortunate that Uncle bequeathed a significant portion of his library to me—largely books of poetry and romances—and not simply left everything to Robin, who surely would have liquidated the books along with everything else to finance his expedition; and they would be gone now too. The *Benjamin Franklin* must remain, yet I fear she may be in as sad a state as her master, in which case she can only be auctioned in sections for her timber, and whichever gear survived. As you may surmise, I have not broached such subjects with my brother.

There is a trader in books in Marchmont Street, you may recall, Mr Squire, and of late I have sold a volume or two. I must be watchful of course not to dispose of one of Felix's favorites, the Sarah Fielding, for instance, or the John Gays, or the American author, Mr Irving. I wonder sometimes at Uncle's tastes. Perhaps he was indiscriminate and purchased books as much for their mere availability as for their subject matter. Felix may have inherited the trait as his selections of material are remarkably eclectic; for a day or two favoring a novel, then a collection of verse, then drama. Oftentimes he is so ardent in his reading I am reluctant to force him

to move on to other studies of a morning—yet I know how earnest you are to have him learn his figures, and geography.

At present Felix is engaged in the *Beggar's Opera*. His favored place is in the corner of the kitchen nearest to the washroom door, and next to a window of course. Mrs O'Hair will fix him his tea, with a splash of milk, as he prefers, and set it on the sill within easy reach from his chair. He will have rolled up the rug as a cushion for his feet, and if it is an especially drafty morning he will place one of my shawls over his shoulders. He will then appear quite the little man, with his old book and tea and shawl. All he would require is a pipe to complete the tableau. Of course his hair hanging down and the perfect ivory of his hands and face falsify the impression. Mrs O's pet-name for Felix is 'Old Soul'.

I am most definitely posting this letter today—this very moment in fact!

I miss you terribly, my dear, and I trust that your business will conclude soon and you will return to us.

Yours

Forever,

